

April 7, 2005

POLITICS AND POLICY

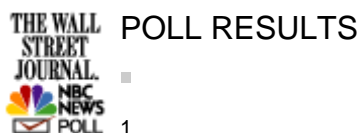
Republicans Splinter On Bush Agenda

**Poll Finds Rifts Opening Over Social Security,
Judicial Filibusters, Schiavo Case**

By **JOHN HARWOOD**
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
April 7, 2005; Page A4

Almost three months into President Bush's second term, a raft of economic and social issues -- Social Security, immigration, gay marriage and the recent national debate over Terri Schiavo -- is splintering the Republican base.

After winning re-election on the strength of support from nine in 10 Republican voters, the president is seeing significant chunks of that base balk at major initiatives, a new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll shows. One-third of Republicans say Democrats in Congress should prevent Mr. Bush and party leaders from "going too far in pushing their agenda," and 41% oppose eliminating filibusters against Mr. Bush's judicial nominees -- the "nuclear option" that Senate Republican leaders are considering.



See results from the latest [Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll](#)².

The Schiavo case has opened another rift. Though Mr. Bush and Republican congressional leaders acted to maximize the opportunity for reinserting Ms. Schiavo's feeding tube, 39% of Republicans said removing the tube was "the right thing to do," while 48% said it was wrong. About 18% of Republicans say they lost respect for Mr. Bush on the issue and 41% lost respect for Congress. The survey of 1,002 adults,

conducted March 31-April 3, has a margin for error of 3.1 percentage points in either direction; the error margin for Republicans alone is 5.2 percentage points.

"It's a story that splits our party," says Republican pollster Bill McInturff, who conducts the Journal/NBC survey with his Democratic counterpart Peter Hart. A

similar split on Social Security, he adds, will make it "hard, but not impossible" for Mr. Bush to accomplish the centerpiece of his second-term agenda.

Divergent Republican opinions hardly preclude passage of Mr. Bush's initiatives, since he remains closely allied with his party's House and Senate leaders, who control the congressional agenda. Still, they help explain why the president has been unable to generate a groundswell of public pressure for issues such as Social Security overhaul, and why Republican lawmakers have struggled for consensus on taxes, spending and deficits in their budget debates.

The 2004 Bush supporters who now are balking at the president's agenda include Harold Heth, a 50-year-old retired Army enlisted man in Shumway, Ill. Mr. Heth, a Republican, says Mr. Bush and his party's congressional leaders "had no business entering into" the Schiavo case; he also frets that the president's policy initiatives are too geared toward corporate interests. Mr. Heth favors preservation of the right to filibuster judicial nominees so that Democrats can provide "checks and balances."



WALL STREET
JOURNAL VIDEO

[WSJ's Gerald Seib discusses](#)³
the results of the latest
WSJ/NBC poll.

Another Republican with reservations is Roberta Shakoori, a 61-year-old homemaker in Sacramento, Calif. She backed Mr. Bush over Democratic rival John Kerry last year and applauded his re-election. Still, she says "I just don't feel comfortable" with Mr. Bush's plan to change Social Security and sees a mismatch between the president's goals and what the American public can accept. "I think he's kind of bitten off more than we can

chew," she says.

During Mr. Bush's first term and his 2004 re-election bid, a solid phalanx of Republican support was at the heart of the White House strategy, helping him pass tax cuts and other initiatives. The president relied on overwhelming support from his conservative political base combined with just enough independents and centrist Democrats to form a working majority.

The latest poll shows that Mr. Bush retains huge Republican support in general. His overall approval rating remains at the middling levels he has registered for more than a year, slipping slightly to 48% from 50% in February. But fully 87% of Republicans approve of his job performance, and 88% express positive views about him personally.

Different elements of the party, however, are balking at specific items on the president's agenda. On his centerpiece initiative of Social Security, for instance, 32% of Republicans call it "a bad idea" to let workers invest payroll taxes in the stock markets.

Despite Mr. Bush's cross-country tour to sell his plan, that proportion has held steady since January, while resistance among Democrats and senior citizens has driven overall opposition to 55% from the 50% recorded on the eve of his second inauguration. On Social Security, "opinions are hardening in a way that makes Bush's job more difficult," Mr. McInturff says.

On judicial nominations -- a cause of contention between the White House and Democratic leaders -- resistance among rank-and-file Republicans is even higher. Four in 10 say the option of filibusters should be preserved.

On Mr. Bush's proposal to grant legal status to some illegal immigrants already in the U.S., Republicans are opposed by 50%-48% -- almost matching the 54%-42% opposition among Democrats. About 55% of independents oppose Mr. Bush's plan, while 38% favor it.

Nearly two-thirds of Republicans say Congress shouldn't pass legislation affecting families in cases such as Ms. Schiavo's, though some Republicans on Capitol Hill aim to do just that. By 50%-37%, Republicans say the federal government should be "less active" on social and moral issues; on gay marriage Republicans split evenly, with 48% saying Congress should pass legislation and 47% saying it shouldn't.

To be sure, Mr. Bush's agenda isn't the only development giving some Republicans heartburn lately. So are controversies surrounding House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. After a closed-door meeting yesterday in which Republicans generally rallied around their leader, former House Ethics Committee Joel Hefley said, "I hear a lot of negative stuff" about Mr. DeLay from constituents. In the poll, Mr. DeLay's negative rating among Americans overall inched up to 24% from 20% in January; his positive rating was unchanged at 17%, while 50% said they were neutral or had no opinion about him.

Even on tax cuts, Mr. Bush's signature first-term economic initiative, one in four Republicans now says tax cuts have "not been worth it" because they have increased the federal budget deficit and have led to reductions in government programs. Robust majorities of independents and Democrats agree, while 69% of Republicans say tax cuts have been worth it because they have strengthened the economy and allowed Americans to keep more of their own money.

The economy remains a concern for all Americans. Amid rising gasoline prices -- ranked as the second-most-closely watched issue of recent weeks after the Schiavo case -- 53% of those surveyed disapprove of the president's handling of the economy, up from 47% in January. The national mood has darkened somewhat in recent weeks, as 51% say the country is heading "on the wrong track" while just 34% say "in the right direction."

"We're in the midst of the tough stuff" in Mr. Bush's second-term agenda, Mr. McInturff says. He predicted that issues the White House intends to tackle later, such as overhauling the tax code, will help unify the party as the 2006 mid-term elections draw closer.

Write to John Harwood at john.harwood@wsj.com⁴

http://online.wsj.com/article_print/0,,SB111282698216100132,00.html